SO MANY MIRACLES

November 24, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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> "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"
> - - Luke 17:17, 18 (RSV)

Scripture

Deuteronomy 8:7-18
Luke 17:11-19

If you have ever given a gift and then felt incomplete when the recipient neglected to thank you, you may have found yourself engaging in a dialogue with yourself...

> "I didn't do it to get a 'thank you'. Why, then, do I seem to want one, almost resent not getting one?
>
> "Am I so small that I can't just enjoy giving and knowing he enjoys the gift...am I giving in order to get affection? Of course not! Then why doesn't it feel right until the 'thank you' comes?"

The simple fact is that the act of giving is not complete until there is a response. Or, better said, the act of receiving is not wholly complete without a response.

Oh, the person took what we offered, ate the candy, smelled the flowers, read the book -- probably enjoyed it. But that part of ourselves, our love, our affection, which was why we gave the gift, doesn't feel as if it has been received until it evokes a response... There is nothing in life that feels emptier than expressing your love and having your expression ignored.

The dynamics of gratitude are complex indeed!

Henri Nouwen, Dutch Jesuit, professor at Yale Divinity School, popular theologian, is also a very interesting and perceptive human being. Several years ago he took six months off from teaching to work among the poor in Latin America. The journal he kept during that time is published under the title Gracias! The entry for November 26, 1981 reads:

> 'Thanksgiving Day! There is probably no day I liked so much in the United States as this day... It was always a day of being

> together with friends, and truly a day of saying thanks. In many ways it struck me as a more spiritual or religious day than Christmas: no gifts, few commercial preparations, just a coming together to express gratitude for life and for all the blessings we have received... I am more and more convinced that gratitude is one of the most sublime of human emotions." (Gracias!, p.55)

Of course, an American Thanksgiving can be trivialized...sometimes superficial exercise in self-congratulation for being more productive than anybody else. And yet there is a simplicity about Thanksgiving that makes it more difficult to corrupt than Christmas. There is also a theological problem which for thoughtful people has a distressing way of becoming a personal and moral problem. Sensitive believers have always pondered the dilemma inherent in thanking God for good health, good fortune, or enough food to survive the winter, which is what it was about originally. If God is to be thanked for abundance, is God thereby responsible for famine as well? Does it make sense to thank God for the good things and not blame God for the bad things? Christian theology, at its best, says "yes -- it does." God does not will, nor cause bad things to happen. God does will good things and is working for good, sometimes against enormous odds. It is the oldest theological quandry around and just when you think you have it resolved, it comes back at you, in an unguarded moment, when in the middle of the evening news, before dinner, cocktail in hand, you encounter the incredible tragedy in Columbia.

Whatever else it is, Thanksgiving is not a time for smugness. If there is any moral way to affirm our affluence, it is surely in the direction of translating gratitude into generosity, and seeing -- as the best of our ancestors did, those Pilgrims, for instance, with their peculiar ideas about compacts and covenants and the interdependence of the community -- that God has given us gifts, not for enjoyment alone, but for their reinvestment, their re-giving to the human family.

It is not a time for smugness. But there remains an elegant and elemental simplicity about Thanksgiving that addresses something in all of us. Giving thanks, in our tradition, is the fundamental religious act. The religion of Israel is in the midst of a profound shift when, in the Deuteronomic code, a portion of which we heard this morning, we encounter an instruction to bless the Lord for the good land after the people had eaten their fill. The faith of Israel is here showing the first signs of becoming a religion of gratitude -- not solely duty, and Israel is beginning to perceive God as a God of grace -- not solely demand. It was Karl Barth who taught that the essence of God is grace and therefore the essence of our response to God is gratitude. "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth," he wrote. "Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightening." (Church Dogmatics, Vol. IV, Part 1, p.41) George Arthur Buttrick paraphrased Barth exquisitely:

> "Praise is native, and men and women give thanks for the same reason that birds sing." (Ibid, Vol. VIII, p.299)

We are most human, most ourselves, our best thinkers have taught, when we are being thankful. We never stand taller than when we are on our knees in thanksgiving. Praise is native -- gratitude is natural.

Well, maybe. If it's natural, why doesn't everybody do it? If gratitude is native, why do we have to have a day for it? My parents, at least, weren't willing to chance it. They knew that wonderful line of King Lear's:

> "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
> To have a thankless child."

And so, saying "thank you" and writing proper "thank you" notes, making obligatory "thank you" telephone calls to aunts and uncles and grandparents was a priority item, regardless of whether or not one happened to feel gratitude. They represented that venerable school of thought that held that feelings weren't all that important: if you get the behavior right, the attitudes and feelings will fall in line in time, and if they don't it doesn't much matter because the people who needed to be thanked got thanked and that was the point of the whole exercise. It wasn't particularly pleasant at the time, but I'm thankful for the discipline. Having thought about it for several decades, and still having to field an occasional inquiry about whether I've written a thank you note to my brother or aunt yet, I'm not at all certain about the nativity of gratitude. I'm not convinced that if there is no imperative to say "thank you" that feelings of gratitude will take hold. I suspect, rather, that in saying "thank you" we put ourselves in a position to learn and experience thankfulness. If that's true, it is very important.. Our full humanity depends on our being grateful and the feeling of gratitude is not only expressed but, in fact, develops within us as we express it.

That, I conclude, is precisely the point of an incident in the 17th Chapter of Luke which was the lesson for the day and is a favorite Thanksgiving text. It seems at first to be a fairly simple story about ingratitude. Nine men were insensitive, ungrateful, rude. One feels, in their boorish behavor, the truth of the Shapesperean dictum... "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is" indeed! But on closer inspection the story is not quite that simple. It is about salvation, health, wholeness, wellness -- and the intriguing suggestion that gratitude is integral to it.

Think again about the story. Jesus and company were approaching a village near the border between Galilee and Samaria. At the outskirts of town they came upon a small leper colony. It would have been a fairly common sight. But religious law and cultural custom required that people with leprosy be totally isolated from the rest of society. And so those involved banded together in a kind of pathetic sub-culture -- the first century version of what we have done under the guise of deinstitutionalizing people and then re-institutionalizing their isolation by making very certain that they don't find it easy to live and work and have being near the mainstream. The group homes and halfway houses clustered around the urban core where no one else wants to live -- is the equivalent of this group of people. In any event, first century lepers were miserable. Any skin disease, any persistent rash or infection was called leprosy. If the victims didn't die of whatever disease they had -- and they rarely did -- they suffered from hunger, exposure or, because of their isolation, went mad. There

were ten people in this group and when they saw the company approaching they stirred and from the prescribed distance called out, "Jesus, have mercy!" Translate that, "Give us money for food."

What they got from Jesus was neither money nor instant healing but a peculiar instruction to show themselves to a priest, the person society assigned the responsibility of diagnosing leprosy. The first interesting nuance about this incident is here. Elsewhere in Luke Jesus does a lot of touching. Jesus lays his hands on people and they become well. Luke, the physician, is ordinarily an intimate and warmly human story teller. Here, he obviously wants us to see something else -- something other than Jesus' power to heal. All Jesus does is send them off to see a priest: on the way they are "cleansed" and the point is next. One of the ten, the Samaritan, the one first century readers -- for whom this was written -- assumed to be morally inferior, turns around, finds Jesus and falls on his face thanking him.

After wondering out loud about the other nine, Jesus says, "Rise and go your way, your faith has made you well." Now clearly, that is not true. His faith had nothing to do with it. The leprosy had left on the way to the priest for all ten of them. Faith has nothing to do with it unless the wellness Jesus means is something more than the absence of leprosy. And that's the point of Luke's subtle story. The nine ingrates weren't well. The ones who didn't say "thank you" didn't have leprosy any more but they weren't healed. Human wholeness, in Jesus' way of thinking, includes gratitude as a basic ingredient. Living out the new life Jesus gives includes being thankful and saying "thank you" and if you're not doing that you're not as whole, as well, or healthy, as you could be.

Can that be tested in any objective sense? Some think so. Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School is one of the leading spokesmen for those who find relationship between stress and disease. Benson's prescriptions, in his excellent little book on stress, The Relaxation Response, come very close to prayer and meditation and practicing gratitude. One much quoted psychiatrist, Hans Selye, writes, "Among all the emotions there is one, which more than any other, accounts for the absence or presence of stress in human relations: that is the feeling of gratitude." And Henri Nouwen whose reflections on Thanksgiving launched the exercise notes in a volume of prayers that fear and anxiety diminish in one's life as we experience gratitude and gratitude comes gradually with the awareness that all of life is a gift. (A Cry for Mercy, p.149)

The critical issue, of course, is whether or not a feeling can be produced or forced like the narcissus bulbs I just purchased and which must be subjected to a specific ritual designed to convince them that they have slept through winter and it is now a balmy week around the beginning of April. Does talking about how pleasant and healthy gratitude is contribute to making us feel grateful? I think there are possibilities for spiritual deepening and growing here.

Gratitude is, it appears, a posture, a stance, into which we seem to grow over the years. It is the acknowledgement that I am not complete in and of myself; that I do not have everything I need, innately; that I have been and am capable of being enriched, graced and enlarged every day of my life. And while that

may seem terribly basic and clearly evident to some, it does swim against the cultural current of vigorous self-sufficiency; the lone, strong individualism that looks nowhere but within for strength.

The better posture, the human posture, here punctuated by Jesus Christ -- is the posture of receptivity, hands outstretched and ready to receive, eyes open to see beauty, ears open to hear loveliness, and heart open to God. It is a very basic posture of elemental gratitude.

There is a wonderful story about the late Abraham Heschel, distinguished Jewish philosopher and theologian which illustrates:

"Several years before his death in 1972, Heschel suffered a near fatal heart attack from which he never fully recovered. A dear friend visiting him found him woefully weak. Just able to whisper, Heschel said to him: 'Sam, when I regained consciousness, my first feeling was not despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. I was ready to depart. Take me, O Lord, I thought. I have seen so many miracles in my life time." (Seasons that Laugh or Weep, Walter Burghardt, p.126-127)

Is it axiomatic that we human beings must be near death before we come to the sense of "so many miracles?" Isn't it possible, now, to live out the wholeness of gratefulness? Isn't it possible to unclench our praying hands, and in the privacy of our secret place actually to pray with our hands open, palms up, to receive God's gift of love? Isn't it possible to experience now the elementary wonder at that most elementary miracle of all -- the fact of our own existence? Isn't it possible to affirm that basic miracle by greeting your image in the mirror every morning, as Frederick Beuchner once confessed he did with this little rubric:

"You are alive. It needn't have been so. It wasn't so once, and it will not be forever. But it is so now. Take this day and be alive in it." (Alphabet of Grace, P.36)

The essays of Lewis Thomas, a microbiologist who is Chancellor of the Sloan Kettering Clinic in New York are full of the ontological wonder and gratitude. He is one of our better prophets -- does not claim to be a theologian -- but knows about miracles. Asked once to name seven new "Wonders of the World," Thomas wrote a delightful essay in which he named an esoteric collection of newly discovered bacteria which lives only in the 300^{o} centigrade water which comes out of vents in the ocean floor, and termites which when enough get together suddenly start building a perfectly engineered, climate controlled cathedral, and the olfactory receptor cell that can differentiate between jasmine and anything non- jasmine, and any human child, and in first place, wonder of wonders, the living system of life that the earth is..."an immense organism, still developing, regulating itself, making its own oxygen, maintaining its own temperature, keeping all its infinite living parts connected and interdependent, including us." (Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, P.62)

You don't have to be on your death bed to experience the grace of God -- the miracle -- which is in the gift of life itself. That, I believe, is what Luke's story of the 10 lepers is about. You are a miracle. How sad not to have known

it. You were loved into life by a man and a woman and God. Against all the astronomical odds of non-being, there is a you. You were loved and nurtured from infancy to childhood through adolescence. None of us arrived fully who we now are. None of us showed up alone.

You are a miracle. So is the person beside you. He or she was loved into existence against all the odds. He or she has been nurtured and loved by others each step of the way. Your life is a gift -- so is the life of the other. So particularly is the gift of another's love: the generous openness to you, the extension of that precious life into your life.

The basic posture of gratitude begins with wonder, the ability to be amazed, and the humility and the energy to receive and to savor the glorious gift of life.

According to Jesus, our wholeness, our wellness, our relative fullness of life, depends on our capacity for gratitude. And so we come to Thanksgiving. I believe the Pilgrim Mothers and Fathers had to know, deeply, about the wholeness of a grateful life. Their hold on life was so very precarious and they had suffered so severely through that first winter that whatever they were celebrating it was something far more profound than enough food to pull them through the next winter -- although it was that, too.

Their deepest gratitude was for God's goodness and grace, which is not always expressed in material abundance and well being. Our best gratitude, likewise, is related to a love and grace which are at the heart of life itself. "Gratitude," the theologians teach us "is what must characterize our dealings with God because grace is what characterizes God's dealings with us." (Robert McAfee Brown, The Pseudonyms of God, P.13)

The Christian Gospel, the Good News, is that God's love is constant: that God's love for us, along the way of our pilgrimage, is strong and real and never ending. The incarnation of that love, the gift of that love, more precious than life itself, is the life of Jesus Christ.

So, in his name, in his love, by his grace, let us join our voices with the voice of one thankful Samaritan, and with the voices of Pilgrims out of the past, and with the voices of one another, expressing our best and highest humanity...

"For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies:
Lord of all to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful prace."

Praise and glory and wisdom
And thanksgiving and honor
And power and strength
To our God for ever and ever. Amen